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Maratha Chhatris and Samadhis: evolution of royal memorial architecture

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Maratha funerary monuments chhatris (cenotaphs) and samadhis (memorial platforms) exemplify a distinct commemorative architecture shaped by syncretic influences and dynastic identities. This study investigates their evolution, analysing key examples from prominent Maratha dynasties (Bhosales, Holkars, Scindias, Peshwas) and comparing them with Rajput cenotaphs and Indo-Islamic tomb traditions. Primary survey of the Bhosale Rajghat in Nagpur, combined with extensive photographic surveys and archival research, reveals how Maratha memorials integrate Hindu symbolism (e.g., Shivalingam, Tulsi Vrindavan) with architectural idioms adapted from Deccan Sultanate and Rajput practices. Early Maratha structures mirrored Sultanate tombs with domes and arched kiosks resembling sarcophagi, while later examples evolved into temple-like pavilions with shikharas, mandapas, and guardian icons (dwarapalas). Maratha rulers appropriated funerary customs to legitimize power and honour ancestors, resulting in a typology that diverges from Islamic burials by focusing solely on memorialization, not interment. Results show regional variations: Nagpur's Bhosales built shrine-like chhatris on cremation sites; Holkars in Indore/Maheshwar blended Rajput aesthetics; Scindias of Gwalior incorporated Mughal elements; Peshwas maintained austere yet ritually functional Samadhis. The discussion infers these findings in terms of religious syncretism, ancestral veneration (dharma and moksha), gender distinctions (e.g., queens' memorials with Tulsi plants), and political symbolism. Maratha chhatris and samadhis can be understood as layered architectural expressions shaped by long-term regional continuities and interactions. The spatial articulation and formal vocabulary represent a distinctive place within India's tradition of royal commemorative architecture.

Keywords: Funerary architecture, Maratha Chhatris, Memorial Cenotaphs, Samadhis, Symbolism, Syncretism

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The funerary architecture of India displays notable diversity shaped by various historical and cultural influences. This is reflected in megaliths, relics, and burial sites. The erecting of megaliths, memorial monuments either on the grave or over the remains of the dead is a tradition which continues since long past. Originating with the Indus Valley people and continuing through Aryan and subsequent periods, this commemorative tradition has persisted across India through multiple cultural and dynastic phases[1].

Early Buddhist stupas, characterized by simple domed designs, were constructed to honour Buddha's relics, embodying concepts of samsara and reverence for enlightened beings. These structures evolved into more intricate forms known as Stupas. Likewise, Islamic tombs and mausoleums conveyed themes of paradise and legacy, while Hindu rituals emphasized elemental forces and the pursuit of cosmic liberation.

However, debate arose regarding the construction of memorial or mortuary monument in the Indian subcontinent. The mortuary monuments did not develop indigenously but are a result of diffusion and is borrowed from the Muhamadans[1].

With the growth of Islamic dynasties in India, military conquests initiated their political and cultural influence. The practice of building maqbaras, which signified graveyards and mausoleum was initiated by them as part of their architectural legacy. Following the early phases on conquest, the tombs evolved from simple markers to sumptuous mausoleum to honour the important figures like rulers and saints. These mausoleum were mostly situated on the family owned lands of the royals, referred to as Bagh Rauza. This showcased artistic expression of political power. Ultimately, the construction of tombs became a means to commemorate the lineage and governance, with succeeding dynasties enhancing this tradition by incorporating new elements[2].

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The tombs of early Sultanate like Sultan Ghari's (13th century) and Iltutmish's showcase legitimacy through monumentality and epigraphy. Medieval tombs were shaped by the state ideology, Sufi authority, and local craft traditions. Tughlaq-period works link the rise of Sufi shrines to shifting religious power and highlight the emergence of garden-tomb settings (like Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq) as a paradise metaphor[3].

The synthesis of Persian and Indian design can be seen in Humayun's Tomb (1560s) and the Taj Mahal (1650s) where tombs aided as burial sites and statements of imperial grandeur.

Against this backdrop, Rajput kingdoms (15th-18th centuries) and later Maratha rulers (17th-19th centuries) developed their own commemorative traditions.

The origin of the chhatris (cenotaphs) date from at least early 16th century when Rajput, Kshatriya warrior kings hailing from Rajasthan and central India started commemorating their kings, noblemen through architectural memorials which was appropriated from the Indo Islamic tomb tradition[4]. Under the Rajput aegis the sign (tomb) and signified (Indo Islamic Kingship) were transferred into chhatris and Rajput kingship, respectively[4]. The tradition of constructing memorial monuments and cenotaphs is purely indigenous architectural practice deeply rooted in Indian civilization. During the Rajput period, when these rulers controlled substantial portions of the Indian subcontinent, the construction of cenotaphs commemorating deceased ancestors became particularly pronounced, establishing Rajput memorial architecture as a significant regional expression of this longstanding practice[1]. These cenotaphs, located in cremation grounds known as 'Chhatri Baghs', resemble late medieval northwest Indian temples and consist of chhatris with garbhagriha and mandapa housing ancestral deity images and a pillared hall for rituals, exemplifying a blend of commemorative and devotional architecture. However, they are not temples but chhatris marking royal cremation sites and memorials. For instance, the royal crematoria at Gaitore in Jaipur and Bada Bagh in Jaisalmer showcase clusters of ornate chhatris honouring the lineage of Maharajas. The Rajputs were so successful at establishing the chhatri as a metonym for land ownership and political sovereignty that in the 18th century new, self-appointed royal communities in north India, such as the Marathas, also appropriated the chhatri to announce the validity of their rule[5].

Maratha chhatris and samadhis represent a distinct memorial tradition across the Deccan and north-central India under the Maratha Empire. Rising in the 17th century under Chhatrapati Shivaji and his successors, Maratha houses-Scindias (Gwalior), Holkars (Indore/Maheshwar), Gaikwads (Baroda), Peshwas (Pune), and Bhosales (Nagpur) built within a landscape shaped by Sultanate and Mughal precedents. Their patronage produced an architectural vocabulary that blends Indic forms with Indo-Islamic elements, visible across forts, temples, and commemorative monuments through local craft, Hindu symbolism, and Sultanate-Mughal motifs.

Historical and cultural context

Reverence, obedience, and the transmission of traditions/values from one generation to the next are some of the most profound human responsibilities for families, clans, and tribes. One of the values that is transmitted in many cultures is respect for elders. However, the ways values are expressed differ based on culture and religion[6]. Ancestors are an integral part of one's existence[7] and a source of identity. For Hindus, honour and reverence are always in tandem. Because of the importance of ancestors, ancestral worship is commonly practiced in India and exists in many forms[8].

The Marathas practiced ancestral veneration as a key element of their Hindu culture. Honouring the dead is linked to dharma and the pursuit of moksha in Hindu philosophy. Chhatris are commemorative structures symbolizing respect, while samadhis serve to honour rather than contain remains. Typically elevated, samadhis are distinguished by their grand scale and intricate design. The elaborate ornamentation showcases the remarkable artistry of the era[9]. Also seen in simple stones to tiered square platforms (sometimes topped with shiv lingas)[10] erected on cremation sites.

Tomb building in the Deccan was initiated by the Tughlaqs on a modest scale as can be seen in the mausoleum of the Chishti saint Hazrat Burhanuddin Gharib erected at Khuldabad in 14th century. This small cubic building has sloping walls with corner pilasters capped with a flattish dome[11].

Islamic dynasties in the Deccan (the five Sultanates of Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmadnagar, Bidar, Berar in the 15th-17th centuries) and the Mughals (who expanded into the Deccan by the 17th-18th centuries) had established the practice of large dynastic tomb complexes.(Fig. 1, Table 1a-d) These complexes (e.g., the Qutb Shahi Tombs in Golconda/Hyderabad)

comprised multiple domed mausoleums set in gardens or on hillocks, often near water bodies for ritual purity. The tombs were stone or masonry structures square or octagonal chambers crowned with a dome, sometimes double-storied, with the actual grave underground and a sarcophagus centred inside. Often, a western mihrab wall was included which indicated the direction of Mecca *i.e.*, qibla, if the structure doubled as a mosque or prayer place[12].

Tomb complexes for instance the Qutub Shahi contains an ensemble of mausoleums, mosques, gardens, enclosure walls, baolis (Stepwells), hammams used for ritual purification before burial[13].

The early Marathas were serving the Sultans of Deccan along with other ethnic groups from 16th to mid-17th century. Hence, the architectural style of the early Marathas resembled that of the sultanates. Stylistic similarities can be seen in two commemorative structures which survive-belongs to grandfathers to Shivaji *viz.*, Maloji Bhosale and Lakhuji Jadhav (early 17th century) respectively in Verul and Sindhkhed[1]. But these structures contained a shivalinga, reflecting Hindu symbolism, illustrating the adaptation of Islamic architectural styles while infusing their own religious significance.

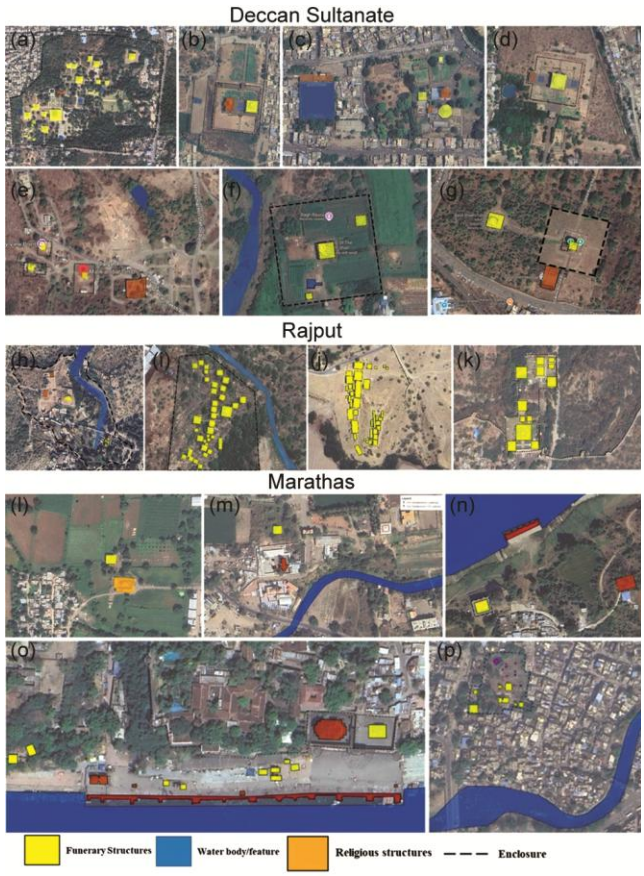

Fig. 1 — Spatial organization and setting of funerary structures and complexes of Deccan Sultanate, Rajputs and Marathas; (Source: Google Earth Maps)

Maraths evolved as kings (mid-17th-mid 18th) from subordinates, engaging in alliances and conflicts with Rajputs. The Maratha-Rajput alliances nurtured cross-cultural exchanges, evident in architecture. Rajputs supported Maratha campaigns against common rivals like the Mughals, and vice versa. The Marathas appreciated Rajput fort architecture and integrated their aesthetics into their constructions. The cenotaphs (under Rajputs) of Orchha, Datia and Tikamgarh, (16th-17th and 17th-19th century respectively) show constructions reflecting royal commissioning where commemorative architecture functioned as a durable medium of lineage memory. The setting of these cenotaphs was such: Orchha's riverside grouping on the Betwa is read as a monumental commemorative landscape; Datia's lake-side precinct near Karan Sagar is commonly described as enclosed and formally organised; Tikamgarh's memorials are interpreted within walled compounds and courtly spatial systems. Finally, murals and interior decoration[1]. Conversely, the Rajputs acknowledged Maratha innovations as they recognized their influence. This reciprocal impact is reflected in memorial architecture, with late 18th-century Maratha memorials beginning to echo Rajput chhatris, featuring temple-like designs and Nagara-style spires (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3).

Research rationale & objectives

Considering the rich interplay of influences, this research aims to to identify the stylistic phases and influences from Sultanate-inspired early forms to the later temple form memorials by systematic documentation and analysis of the evolution of Maratha chhatris and samadhis. This will help understand dynastic variations of Maratha memorials (Bhosale, Holkars, Scindias and Peshwas) through their regional influences and personal beliefs. The study examines how Maratha memorials convey kingship, spirituality, and remembrance, and assert legitimacy by adapting local ritual practices within a wider imperial architectural milieu. It emphasises that study on Maratha commemorative architecture is limited.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a holistic method, integrating literature review, comparative assessment, and fieldwork.

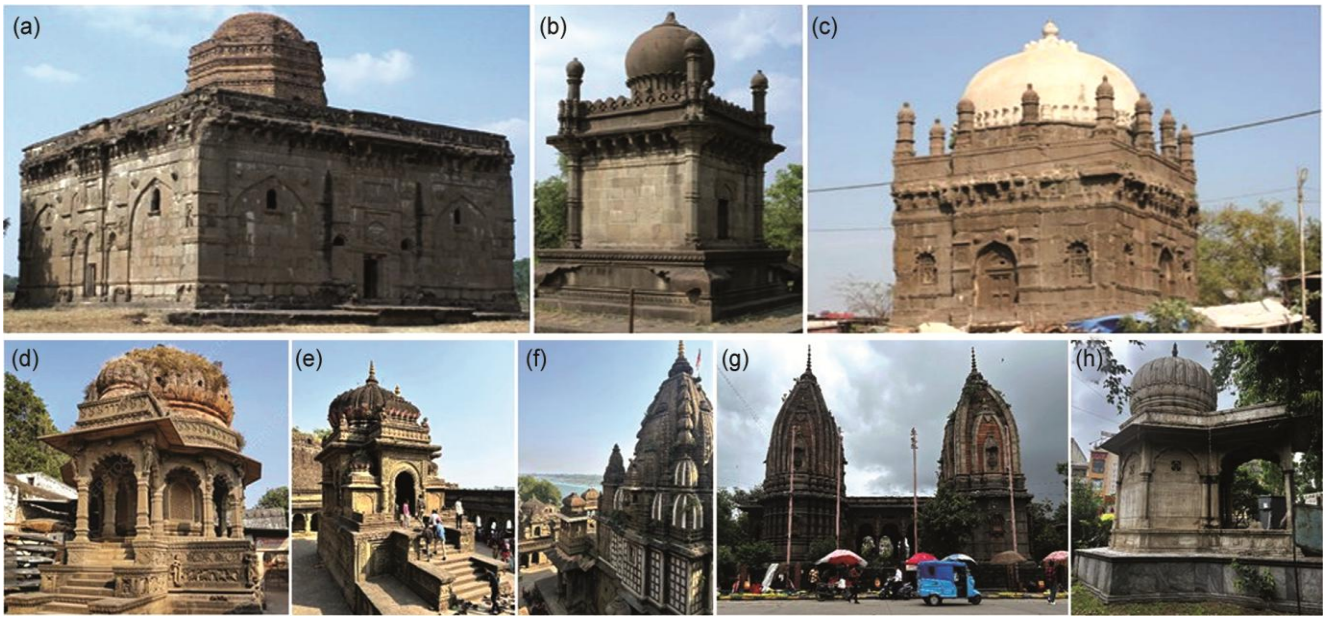

Fig. 2 — Shikhara and Domed form-Funerary structures of Marathas (17^{th}-19^{th} Century); (a-b) Lakhuji and Chimkabai Jadhav Samadhi and Sindhkhed Raja, (c) Maloji Bhosale14 Chhatri at Verul (d-f) Holkar's at Maheshwar and (g-h) Holkar's at Indore

Fig. 3 — Rajput hero-stone enshrined within a Chhatri with a dome. at Devikund Sagar (Bikaner) 4 Rajputs pioneered encasing hero-steles in memorial pavilions

Secondary research

Literature review conducted comprehensively on ancient texts, scholarly publications like books, research papers on existing literature in alignment to the Deccan, Maratha and Rajput architecture. Records like gazetteers, travellers' accounts, Maratha court records which helped identify research gaps, particularly in Maratha contexts compared to Rajput cenotaphs.

Primary survey (case studies)

To understand the typologies-chhatris and samadhis, on ground surveys were conducted at Indore, Maheshwar and Nagpur which are royal cremation sites of Holkar's and Bhosales. Systematic photographic recording of architectural elements (pillars, domes, and carvings), noting iconographic motifs (deities, symbols) was a part of documentation supported by interviews with local historians and priests to capture oral histories and contemporary ritual practices. The sites chosen showcase 17^{th}-19^{th} century structures representing chronological evolution.

Comparative analysis

To understand the Deccan sultanate tombs, Rajput and Maratha's commemorative architectural typologies an elaborate comparative assessment, setting, form, key architectural features, symbolic markers (including gendered motifs in Maratha samadhis), and materials/craft traditions. This analysis along with primary and secondary research helped validate the readings of Rajput and Mughal influence along with distinct Maratha traits.

Table 1 — Comparative analysis of the funerary structures and architectural settings of the Deccan Sultanate, Rajputs, and Marathas

	1. Funerary architecture of Deccan Sultanate (15th to 17th Century)		
	Golconda Sultanate		
A	i. Tomb of Sultan Quli Qutb Shah	ii. Tomb of Muhammad QuliShah	iii. Tomb of Fatima Sultana
	Fig i-1		
	17°23′42″N 78°23′46″E		
	Setting in an eclosed complex with group of funerary structures,water bodies in form of Baoli,tanks and fountains		
	Bijapur Sultanate		
B	i. Tomb of Ibrahim Adil Shah II	ii. Jod Gumbaz	iii. Gol Gumbaz built mid
	Fig i-2,3,4		
	16°49′37″N 75°42′7″E	16°49′31″N 75°42′44″E	16°49′48.11″N 75°44′9.95″E
	Enclosed setting with a tomb,an idgah and a well.	Tombs with a religious structure near a water pond	Enclosed setting with a tomb,an idgah , water fountains and well
	Ahmednagar Sultanate		
C	i.Tomb of Malik Ambar	ii.Tomb of Nizam Ahmed Shah	iii.Tomb of Minister
	Fig i-5,6		
	20.0142°N 75.1845°E	19° 6'4.18"N 74°43'41.92"E	
	Group of tombs located on a located on a hillock with a religious structure and a pond	Enclosed as a complex with primary tomb of kind and tomb of ministers with a step well located near the river stream	
	Bidar Sultanate		
D	i. Tomb of Qasim Barid Shah I(Built 16-17th century)	ii. Tomb of Ali Barid Shah	iii. Tomb of minister
	Fig i- 7		
	17.919°N 77.504°E		
	Tomb within anenclosure with a religious structure		
	2. Funerary Architecture of Rajput's (Early 16th 19th century)		
	Rathore Dynasty of Marwar		
A	i. Mandore Gardens,Jodhpur	ii.Panchkund Chhatris	
	Fig i-8,9		
	26°21'14.83"N 73° 1'57.63"E	26°21'27.66"N 73° 1'43.78"E	
	Enclosed within the fortified wall along with group of temples and temple form Chattris near a water stream	Group of Chhatris located near river stream at the outskirts of the town	
	Bhati Dynasty of Rajputs		
B	i. Bada Bagh Chhatris.Jaisalmer(built from 18th to early 20th century)		
	Fig i-10		
	26°57'17.71"N 70°53'16.26"E		
	Group of Chhatris located at the outskirts of the town		
	Kachwah Dynasty of Rajputs		
C	i. Gaitore Chhatris		
	Fig i-11		
	26°56'34.59"N 75°49'28.97"E		
	Enclosed within the fortified wall along with group of Chattrris laid out resembling Chaar Bagh layout		
	3. Funerary Architecture of Marathas (17th to 19th century)		
	Samadhis of Bhosale and Jadhav		
A	i. Lakhuji Ladhav	ii. Maloji Bhosale	
	Fig i-12,13		
	19°57'7.34"N 76° 7'17.33"E	20° 1'28.47"N 75°10'8.68"E	
	amadhi with a Shiv Temple	Chhatri near a temple located near the river stream	
	Peshwe		
B	i.Samadhi of Baji Roa Peshwa I at Raverkhedi built early 19th century		
	Fig i-14		
	22°10'24.10"N 75°52'34.89"E		
	Samadhi located within an enclosure with Ghats and temple located near the river		
	Chhatris of Holkar of Maheshwar		
C	i.Muktabai	ii.Vithoji	iii.Ahilyabai
	Fig i-15		
	22°10'11.18"N 75°35'2.95"E	22°10'12.06"N 75°35'17.02"E	22°10'12.09"N 75°35'15.11"E
	Group of Chhatris and Shiva temples,shivalings placed on the stretch of ghats near river Narmada		

... Contd.

Table 1 — Comparative analysis of the funerary structures and architectural settings of the Deccan Sultanate, Rajputs, and Marathas (Contd.)

3. Funerary architecture of Marathas (17th to 19th century)				
	Chhatris of Bhosales (Nagpur)			
D	i. Raghuji -I	ii. Mudhoji I	iii. Khandoji	
	iv. Janoji	v. Raghuji II	vi. Kashibai	
	Samadhi of Bhosales (Nagpur)			
E	vii. Raghuji III	viii. Bakabai	ix. noblemen and ministers	x. women of royal family
	Fig i-16			
	21° 8'20.18"N 79° 6'13.91"E			
	Group of Chhatris and Samadhis Situated in an enclosed ancestral cremation ghat near the River Nag			

Results

Stylistic evolution and typology

Sultanate-inspired beginnings (17th – early 18th century)

Early Maratha memorials were heavily influenced by Indo-Islamic tomb architecture. Memorials of Bhosales and Jadhav (early 17th century) at Verul and Sindhkhed Raja feature square bases with octagonal domes strikingly similar to the nearby Ahmadnagar Sultanate tombs[14] (Fig. 2a-c and Fig. 4). These structures include corner finials and lotus-petal borders around the dome's drum motifs commonly seen in Golconda and Bijapur tombs. These structures house a shivalinga on a raised platform which was similar to the sarcophagus placement in Islamic tombs except for the religious substitution. Thus, Marathas were consciously amalgamating Islamic architectural vocabulary with Hindu ritual requirements. Mid-16th century Qutb Shahi tomb in Hyderabad (Fig. 4), show the bulbous dome and archways that early Maratha chhatris matched. The central chamber houses a cenotaph below the dome, alike later Maratha practice of placing a Linga.

The Marathas had a traditional practice of erecting veergals (Hero Stones) and satisheelas (Sati Stones) to honour martyred warriors and women who committed sati (self-immolation). These were typically upright stone slabs having carved panels illustrating the individual's heroic deeds and, in the case of sati stones, the woman with arm raised which signified sacrifice). At several early Maratha sites like temples, forts etc. we find hero-stones later housed under pavilion structures. In North Konkan villages Hero Stones (around 13th century) at Kalambhom shows an upper panel with a bearded warrior worshipping a Shiv Linga, depicts fight scenes, sword wielding soldiers[15]. This practice likely served as a bridge from the ephemeral folk memorial (stone stele) to a more architecturally elaborate chhatri. For example, Rajput cenotaphs at times encased hero-stones under domed kiosks (Fig. 3). This adaptation can also be seen in Marathas- satisheel in the Kashibai chhatri at Nagpur (Fig. 5-a). Thus, the origin of Maratha chhatris lies partly in hero-stone traditions given monumental form.

Fig. 4 — Qutub Shahi Tomb Complex

Rise of distinct Maratha Chhatri (late 18th century)

As Marathas prominently came to the power, their commemorative architecture developed into a unique hybrid style as noted:

Integration of temple architecture

The later 18th century chhatris often had a jagati- multi tiered plinth having relief panels, a garbhagriha, in some cases an antarala. The garbhagrihas were topped with shikhara instead of domes. The chhatri of Ahilyabai Holkar (18th century, Maheshwar) is a temple dedicated to her and her husband having a Nandi bull facing the lingam inside and Nagar style shekhari shikhara above. (Fig. 2f & Fig. 5b). This

temple-form was likely inspired by Rajput cenotaphs of the time e.g., the later Jodhpur and Udaipur cenotaphs which themselves had begun incorporating temple elements. The cenotaphs at Orchha, Datia and Tikamgarh (16^{th}-19^{th} century) show temple-referential grammar: predominantly square plans organised around a garbha-griha-like core, frequently enveloped by corridors, mandapas, and articulated through arched openings. Superstructures combine Nagara-derived shikhara forms (often locally adapted) with Bundeli dome traditions, with mature examples suggesting panchayatana-like compositional tendencies and a region-specific ornamental vocabulary (niches, oriels, multifoil profiles)[1].

Use of domes and arches persist

The chhatri dome remained prominent, often paired with a shikhara. Some Maratha memorials feature a dome over the mandapa and a shikhara over the sanctum, merging styles (as seen in Holkar chhatris at Maheshwar and Indore; Fig. 2d-h). Ogee and multi-foliated arches continued to define openings, reflecting Islamic influence in Maratha architecture. The chattris at Bhosale Rajghat Nagpur (Fig. 6) showcases an octagonal dome with intricate cusped arches.

Elaborate ornamentation & symbolism

During this period, Maratha memorials became more embellished. Plinths were decorated with carvings narrating battles, processions, or lotus medallions (invoking purity). For instance, Raghuji Bhosale I's chhatri at Nagpur (early 18^{th} century) plinth has depicting war scenes, elephants, and processional motifs akin to hero-stone iconography suggesting valour of the deceased. Similar can be seen on the plinth of Vithoji Holkar chhatri at Maheshwar

Fig. 5 — (a) Inner sanctum (with shaktisheela) of Kashibai Bhosalechhatri; (b) Garbhagriha of Ahilyabai Holkar Chhatri at Maheshwar; (c) Raghuji Bhosale IV Chhatri at Nagpur

Fig. 6 — Chhatris and Samadhis at Bhosale Rajghat, Nagpur

(Fig. 7a,b). The Nandi statues at male samadhis and carved Tulsi Vrindavans (a pedestal planter for sacred basil) at female samadhis became a distinguishing Maratha practice. In the Nagpur Rajghat, the samadhis of queens like Bakabai is simple raised platforms each with a tulsi plant growing atop, signifying a pious feminine memorial, whereas the samadhi of Raghuji Bhosale IV and men is marked by a lingam and Nandi (Fig. 5c & Fig. 6). This gendered differentiation in memorial iconography appears unique to Hindu traditions (no parallel in Islamic tombs, which rarely have gender-specific symbolism beyond epitaphs).

Spatial layout

Chhatri Bagh concept: Marathas, much like Rajputs, began to establish dedicated cremation grounds for royals. The Holkar chhatri and samadhis in Maheshwar (Fig. 1o & Table 1.3 (c)-i,ii,iii), a Scindia chhatri Complex in Gwalior are baghs or memorial complexes with multiple chhatris set around water bodies or gardens (Table 1.3 (a-d)). The Nagpur Bhosale Rajghat is less formally laid out but similarly contains multiple chhatris and samadhis within one bounded area by the Nag River (Table 1.3 (d)-i,ii,iii,iv,v,vi (e)-vii,viii,ix,x and Fig. 1p). Notably, Marathas placed these complexes near water (rivers or lakes) to facilitate rituals of ash immersion and tarpan (water offerings). For example, Bajirao Peshwa's samadhi at Raverkhedi (Table 1-3.Bi and Fig. 1n) is on the Narmada River bank, and the Nagpur Rajghat is next to Nag nadi (river), as well chhatris at Maheshwar aligning with the practice that water is crucial for final rites in Hindu custom.

Table 1 presents a detailed comparative summary of Deccan Sultanate, Rajput, and Maratha funerary monuments with respect to its setting and location.

Key highlights are: Sultanate tombs – true domes, underground crypts, qibla orientation; Rajput Chhatris – open-sided domed pavilions, later with temple elements; Maratha memorials – initially domed and closed like tombs, later open and temple-like, consistently housing Hindu symbols (Fig. 2 & Fig. 6).

Case study – Nagpur Bhosale Rajghat findings

The Nagpur Rajghat (Fig. 1p) (cremation ground of the Bhosale rulers of Nagpur, 18^{th}-20^{th} century) encapsulates the progression of Maratha funerary architecture: (Table 1 d-e & Fig. 6). The earliest Chhatri here, attributed to Raghuji Bhosale I and

Fig. 7 — War scenes at the Plinth of (a) Raghuji Bhosale I (Nagpur) and (b) Vithoji Chattri (Maheshwar) (c-e) Dwarapalas at Holkar's Chhatris of Maheshwar, Indore and Bhosale at Nagpur respectively

Mudhoji Bhosale (early 18th century) is a domed structure on a high platform. It has arched doorways on three sides and a solid back wall on the west (like a mihrab orientation, but here likely to support the linga installation). Inside, on the podium, a black stone shivalinga is installed where a tomb's cenotaph would usually lie. This Chhatri strongly reflects Mughal/Deccan influences (dome, arches) yet is instilled with Maratha identity through the linga and narrative carvings.

A mid-phase example is the chhatri of and Khandoji and Janoji Bhosale (19th and mid-19th century), which shows transition. It possesses cupolas which resemble miniature spire-like ornaments at corners and more prominent florals motifs. Its pillars are slenderer and more decorated, suggesting influence from Marathas who had seen Rajput

The chhatris (mid and late19th century) such as those of Raghuji II and his queen Kashibai built in full temple form. Kashibai's chhatri, for example, is basically a temple with a nagara shikhara and an inner sanctum housing what locals call a satisheela (Fig. 5a & Fig. 6) (a type of sati stone) instead of a linga. This stone is revered as representing the queen's satificiation (the stone likely signifies her devoted wife status). Her chhatri has an ornate doorframe with Ganga Yamuna River goddess motifs, bridging the idea of a temple and memorial. Raghuji II's, on the other hand, has an open mandapa in front, and used for annual shraddha ceremonies by descendants. The inclusion of a mandapa aligns with the ritual need of a sheltered space to conduct rites (e.g., pinda daan, the offering of rice-balls to ancestors).

Throughout the Nagpur's Bhosale Rajghat site, numerous smaller samadhis dot the landscape, marking other royals' cremation spots. Some have carved padukas (footprints) on top, a symbol often used to denote the exact place of cremation or the presence of the person's spiritual essence. Almost all male samadhis here have a tiny nandi figure or engraving, and female ones a tulsi planter, confirming the gendered practice noted earlier.

A notable structure at Rajghat is the intact cremation platform (Fig. 8) used historically for burning the corpse. It is a simple brick and stone platform in the cremation ground, indicating that after cremation, ashes would be collected and enshrined in the memorials nearby. Its presence highlights that unlike Islamic tomb-gardens which were designed for burial from the start, Hindu sites have a two-step process: cremate, then commemorate on-site (Table 1, Fig. 2 & Fig. 6).

Discussion

The Maratha chhatri and samadhi tradition emerged from a confluence of religious imperatives and cross-cultural interactions. The findings can be understood in the following themes:

Religious syncretism and symbolism

Maratha memorial architecture demonstrates syncretism by blending traditional Hindu and influence of Islamic forms for new purposes. The initial memorials of the Marathas adapted the domed roof on mostly square planforms which was taken from the Sultanate tombs to convey a sense of

Fig. 8 — Cremation Platform at Bhosale Rajghat, Nagpur- this open platform by the Nag River was used for the funerary pyre; the Chhatris and Samadhis surround it, emphasizing the Maratha practice of building memorials at the cremation spot, not at a separate lo location

authority and permanence. The placement of shivalinga or hero stone of a Hindu warrior within, the structures were sanctified in alignment to their belief system. As the Marathas progressed to power and authority, they pursued to showcase their Hindu kingship more visibly, especially after their triumphs over the Mughals. To claim their image as protectors of dharma they shifted to temple-like chhatris. These chhatris were incorporated with temple elements like shikharas, mandapas (mostly in later chhatris) conveyed that these were not mere markers of death, but served as sites for worship, honouring both the ruler's memory and the gods to whom rituals for the dead were directed. A king who maintains the dharma is respected even after the death according to Hindu belief. The establishment of chhatris became a bridge between the worldly power and divinity, which made the rulers godly ancestors. Integration of iconographic elements like god-figures, dwarapalas (door guardians) (Fig. 7c-e), within the chhatris enhanced this mix of temple and memorial.

Political legitimacy and identity

The early phase memorials of the Marathas were visually similar to the Islamic tombs as they were positioning themselves alongside the Sultans who were in power and authority. The later memorials like chhatris in the form of temples depicted a transformation in these typologies showing the prominence of Marathas as they started becoming influential in 17th century Deccan region which was long dominated by Bahmani and Deccan sultans. Marathas on becoming kings, adapted this form to their identity.

The initial chhatris of Bhosale at Nagpur showed strong Islamic influence in their form. The later chhatris showed transformations to temple like chhatris. However they made their chhatris ritual centric which was based on the Hindu belief system. This is evident from the initial and later chhatris (Fig. 6).

The Holkars of Maheshwar and Indore had close ties with the Rajputs during the 18th century. Therefore their chhatris and samadhis showcase some influence of Rajputana style like building grand cenotaphs and samadhis. For example, Tukoji Holkar’s chhatri features a high ornamented dome along with miniature domes very much similar to those found presently in Rajasthan. This aligns with Rajput royal traditions to strengthen their legitimacy, especially since the Holkars, did not originally belong to ancient royal lineage.

The chhatris of Scindia from Gwalior adapted numerous Mughal as well as Rajput architectural elements in their design.

Their chhatri for Mahadji Scindia, built in the late 18th century, resembles a temple like form and also features a strong Mughal charbagh layout and white marble with inlay work, resembling a Mughal tomb, although it lacks a grave (it features a sectarian symbol and a panel praising the Maharaja). Scindias served as cavalry men under the Sultans of Deccan before becoming an independent ruling clan. M. Belli says that the Scindia’s chhatris were designed to match the Rajputana practices while showing Maratha authority in the North[4]. Their chhatris conveyed sacredness and political messages. Therefore, design choices reflected political take, adaptation of Mughal aesthetics to signal their rise to power while following Hindu commemorative practices.

The chhatris and samadhis were testimony to the Maratha’s architectural legacy and memory. Maratha rulers used these memorials to symbolize their rule and as sites for royal commemoration similar to the tombs of Islamic rulers.

Ritual function and public interaction

Maratha chhatris featured open halls (mandapas) for seating and hosting priest and family members during the 12th day and anuual shraddha ceremonies post cremation. These rituals were as per Hindu customs and beliefs. The architecture had to accommodate gatherings and ritual spaces, resulting in open mandapas and porches. This functional aspect transformed the designs from closed tombs to open pavilions.

Some chhatris have also become pilgrimage sites. Ahilyabai Holkar's chhatri in Maheshwar serves as a local shrine. The shaktisheela of Rani Kashibai in Nagpur is honoured by local women for blessings. This practice shows how memory and worship intersect within Hindu culture. It illustrates that Hindu chhatri-samadhis served as active sites for rituals.

Gender and symbolic hierarchy

The samadhis dedicated to women featured tulsi vrindavans, symbolizing sanctity and feminine virtue, and functioned as living shrines through daily worship. To symbolize masculinity, martial valour and protection, the chhatris and samadhis of men were installed a nandi or shivalinga. Marathas notably provided independent memorials like chhatris and samadhis to women. For influential queens, the

memorials were ornamented with unique iconography (eg. Ahilyabai Holkar Chhatri, Krishnabai Holkar Chhatri, Kashibai Bhosale Chhatri) (Fig. 2 & Fig. 6), however Marathas also followed Rajput traditions where women's memorials were comparatively smaller spatially and in size to the king's chhatri.

Shift from Islamic burial practices

According to the Islamic death customs, the tombs contained the underground burials (crypt) with bodily remains. Marathas were Hindus and followed a practice of cremating bodies and later immersing ashes them into water. Thus the need of underground crypts was completely eliminated from the Maratha memorials. Prior to construction of memorials, Marathas scattered handfuls of ashes on the site where memorials were planned to be built. This practice resulted in placing chhatris and and samadhis above the ground and served solely as memorials rather than tombs. They rather incorporated temple like elements *viz.*, shikharas, mandapas, functional ceremonial spaces to the chhatris. This highlights opposite philosophical ideologies: Islamic tombs preserved the physical legacies while as Hindu memorials seek to honour the immortal legacy and assist departed soul's afterlife journey.

Broader implications for Indian heritage

In spite of the political differences and conflict between the Islamic rulers and Marathas there was cultural exchange evident through the architecture. The study of Maratha memorials extends the knowledge on architectural adaptations and transformations through socio-cultural and political aspects. Many temples from 18th century added the Indo-Islamic elements, like the Maratha's new developed design approach. This highlights an integral phase in Indian funerary architecture, tracing a continuity from ancient megaliths, stupas, tombs to the chhatris and samadhis. The Maratha memorials hence prove to be a critical link in this chain, showing the mix of external and indigenous adaptations and influence. This also inspired the British as the later chhatris were also seen in the Indo-Saracenic style.

The unique funerary architecture reflected the evolving socio-political and religious dynamics of their time and depicted a blend of artistic expression, political symbolism and sacred spaces. They became landmarks and contributed a significant chapter to India's architectural heritage.

Conclusion

This research recognizes the Maratha chhatris and samadhis as an unique funerary architectural typology, shaped through the influences and adaptation of earlier traditions to suit the Maratha socio-religious perspective, key factors influencing this evolution as below:

Religious tradition

The Maratha memorial sites were conceived to uplift the soul and honour it through rituals which were deeply rooted in Hindu beliefs of dharma, moksha, and ancestor veneration which guided the purpose and form of Maratha memorials. The chhatris were given temple like form along with spaces required for ritualistic purposes.

Dynastic identity and interactions

The Maratha dynasty based on their context and cultural exchange incorporated their own architectural character to their memorials.

Peshwas (*Pune*)

Peshwas were chief to the Shivaji Bhosale family. Their memorials showed close resemblance to Bhosales.

Holkars (*Indore/Maheshwar*)

Their memorials adapted the Rajput style grandeur like ornate domes, multi pillared canopies, hero stones and temple sanctums showcasing their close ties with the Rajputs.

Scindias (*Gwalior*)

Strong Mughal and Rajput influence in archways, gardens, and use of marble.

Bhosales (*Nagpur*)

Showcased both type's *i.e.*, the domed chhatris and later chhatris in temple form. These chhatris had intricate relief carvings depicting the valour and mix of Islamic and local Maratha style.

The comparative analysis helped understand that the Maratha funerary monuments memorialized and honoured the deeds and spirits of the royal rather than containing remains. The Deccan Sultanate had necropolises which contained crypts in tombs for the royals as a symbol. The Marathas chhatris and samadhis become a way to enshrine the memories of nobility and royalty, not the bodily remains. This showed a shift in Maratha memorials based on their philosophies, ideologies and belief system.

This research validates that a new architectural typology emerged and was shaped by the cultural

dialogue and shift in political scenario from 17th to 19th century. Chhatris and samadhis represented Maratha authority, values, and created a lasting legacy of such memorial complexes that support tourism and community identity presently.

Preservation and detailed scholarship of these Hindu Maratha chhatris and samadhis is very crucial. It puts light on the blend of cultural influences, changing notion of sacred kingship and the exchange in Indian art and architecture, making it essential to be recognized alongside the Buddhist, Mughal and Rajput funerary architecture.

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Author Contributions

RW conceptualized the research concept, conducted primary and secondary surveys through comprehensive field surveys at Indore, Maheshwar and Nagpur, systematic literature review and developing significant parts of the manuscript. SB contributed in the synthesis and analysis of data, contextual interpretation of the results. Both authors jointly analysed the findings, equally reviewed each other's contributions for intellectual thoroughness, and finalised the manuscript. The research design, data collection, analysis, and writing were co-developed by both authors, by providing their individual inputs

Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm and declare that there is no known conflict of interest related to this research work.

Ethics Statement

This research is original and the data presented is a personally gathered from authentic sources. Citations are duly provided wherever necessary

Data Availability

The data from the research can be made available from the authors subjected to justifiable request.

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